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# Soviets increasing their involvement with Filipino rebels

By Tom Breen  
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MANILA — The Soviet Union appears poised to play a bigger role in the Philippine communist insurgency at a time when the rebels are sharply divided over whether to continue their war or accept government cease-fire offers.

For several months now, Soviet operatives have supplied high-powered rifles and other arms on a regular basis to Philippine rebels, according to well-placed diplomatic and military sources.

The arms have been smuggled into this country from Vietnam and other locations through southern sea lanes.

Philippine intelligence sources also report that the KGB took advantage of the 60-day cease-fire in December and January to infiltrate more agents into communist strongholds and is now solidly entrenched in parts of Mindanao and other provinces.

The intelligence sources said some of the KGB men posed as gold panners before infiltrating rebel ranks, where they are now providing arms, training, money and key intelligence data.

One former rebel leader, Welijado "Commander Mercado" Basanez, told the Philippine military over the weekend that at least three Soviets had been assisting the guerrillas in Surigago del Sur province on northern Mindanao since 1985.

"If our intelligence information is correct, the Soviets appear ready to take advantage of the country's general political instability and the current power struggle among Philippine communists to extend their tentacles into life here," said a Philippine intelligence source.

U.S. Ambassador Stephen Bosworth, in a conversation with Philippine Defense Minister Rafael Iletto on Friday, expressed serious concern about the insurgency and possible Soviet involvement.

The subject is expected to be raised again today when Mr. Iletto meets with Assistant U.S. Secretary of State Gaston Sigur at Philippine military headquarters near Manila.

Although Moscow calls the allegations "absurd," Western military sources pointed out that the Soviets can arm and supply the guerrillas "indefinitely" from their strate-

gic and well-equipped naval base at Cam Ranh Bay in Vietnam, just across the South China Sea from the Philippines.

Western intelligence agencies have monitored scores of Soviet planes and ships conducting daily reconnaissance missions near the Philippines.

For years, Philippine communists had rejected assistance from the Soviets and other communist powers, priding themselves in conducting a home-grown insurgency. Two years ago, however, they indicated they would seek aid wherever they could get it.

The increasing Soviet involvement coincides with a bloody new round of internal wrangling among communist rebels divided by the cease-fire issue.

Military sources report that scores of rebels wishing to surrender have been killed and dropped in mass graves by those who want to keep fighting. One such grave on northern Mindanao south of Manila yielded 600 bodies.

In the past month, at least two high-ranking communists on Cebu

island in the south, Jovito Plaza and the Rev. Rustico Tan, were brutally slain, reportedly by rebels of the New People's Army, after attempting to surrender. Both men were peace negotiators for the National Democratic Front, a coalition of leftist groups controlled by the communists.

Several analysts said the internal struggle erupted about 10 days after the 60-day cease-fire ended, when many rebels wanted to accept President Corazon Aquino's peace offers but were killed or intimidated into carrying on the war.

This undermined the communists' Manila-based leaders, Satur Ocampo and Antonio Zumel, who, while they had broken off peace talks with the government last month, nonetheless appeared determined to seek a political settlement of the war.

According to the analysts, the two former newsmen may soon be replaced by more militant rebel commanders, either from the southern Philippines or northern Luzon.

About 23,000 armed communist rebels operate in most of the country's 74 provinces. Those best trained are with guerrilla units north of Manila and in the far south.